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**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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**THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR:  
A SUPERPOWER'S INABILITY TO DENY INSURGENT SANCTUARY**

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower's Inability to Deny Insurgent Sanctuary

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**Thesis:** The Soviet Union failed to deny sanctuary to the Mujahideen because it deployed an inadequate force to Afghanistan, but more importantly, it proved unable to counteract international support for the insurgency.

**Discussion:** The Soviet Union invaded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) in December 1979 intending to stabilize the rapidly deteriorating political-military situation in its newest client state. Afghanistan's fledgling communist government lacked the legitimacy or strength to suppress the growing Mujahideen insurgency. Instead of simply providing security, logistics, and combat support for DRA forces fighting the Mujahideen as initially planned, the conventionally structured, trained, and equipped Soviet 40<sup>th</sup> Army assumed the lead against a determined guerrilla opponent in some of the most rugged terrain on earth. The Mujahideen quickly recognized the imprudence of engaging the Soviets conventionally, and embarked upon a guerrilla campaign that leveraged both internal and transnational sanctuary in order to rest, rearm, refit, train, receive medical attention, and recruit and organize reinforcements. The Soviets properly identified sanctuary as a critical requirement for the Mujahideen to wage a successful resistance, but never effectively deprived the insurgency of this requirement. Despite tactical innovations and the ad hoc development of counterinsurgency doctrine, the Soviets lacked the troop strength and composition necessary to eliminate internal Mujahideen sanctuary in the mountains, or to interdict transnational aid and sanctuary. Afghanistan's terrain was simply too rugged and difficult for the Soviet Union to rely on air interdiction and its relatively small counterinsurgency force to adequately deny physical sanctuary or infiltration routes within the country. Soviet efforts to deny internal sanctuary drove the Mujahideen across the border into Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, Iran. Pakistan not only provided secure sanctuary for the Mujahideen, but actively supported the insurgency throughout the conflict. Other states such as the United States, China, Iran, Britain, France, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) funneled money and arms to the insurgents. Political and economic constraints largely precluded the Soviet Union from expanding the war into neighboring states to deny the Mujahideen transnational sanctuary and external support. The Soviet expansion of the war would have undermined arms control negotiations with the United States, further isolated the Soviet Union in the international community, and significantly strained its fragile economy.

**Conclusion:** Unable to break the will of the Mujahideen, who were fighting a jihad against "infidels," Soviet prospects for success in Afghanistan demanded the elimination of internal and transnational sanctuary. The Soviets clearly complicated Mujahideen operations and sustainment efforts by depopulating the countryside, improving its counterinsurgency force, and employing superior firepower and technology to interdict infiltration routes from Pakistan and Iran. However, the Soviet Union never effectively denied sanctuary to the Mujahideen because it deployed an inadequate force to Afghanistan, and it proved unable to counteract international support for the insurgency.

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## PREFACE

Nearly eight years since initiating combat operations in Afghanistan, the United States and our allies are witnessing first-hand the difficulty of denying sanctuary to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Similar to the Mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War, today's insurgents are leveraging mountainous terrain and international borders to survive against a superpower's counterinsurgency efforts. As the United States prepares to shift focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, it behooves us to incorporate lessons learned from the Soviet-Afghan War in order to adequately shape our force and equipment, evolve counterinsurgency tactics and doctrine, and integrate the elements of national power to deny insurgent sanctuary. I chose to study the Soviet efforts to deny the Mujahideen sanctuary because I believe sanctuary denial is a critical requirement for our success in the current fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

I would like to thank Professor Erin Simpson for her assistance with this paper.

*"When President Zia...offered Pakistan as a secure base area, he condemned the Soviets to a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign that they were ill-prepared to fight."<sup>1</sup>*  
- Brigadier Mohammad Yousef, 1992.

The Soviet Union did not anticipate a decade-long counterinsurgency fight against the Mujahideen when it invaded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) in December 1979. Determined to stabilize the rapidly deteriorating political-military situation in its newest client state, the Soviet Union conducted a *coup de main* modeled after successful interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). The Soviet leadership believed that "...the mere presence of Soviet forces would serve to 'sober up' the Mujahideen..."<sup>2</sup> and enable the DRA's communist government to suppress the insurgency. Failing to appreciate the will of the Mujahideen to resist foreign invaders, the Soviets miscalculated the nature of the war into which they entered. Instead of simply providing security, logistics, and combat support for DRA forces fighting the Mujahideen, the conventionally structured, trained, and equipped 40<sup>th</sup> Army assumed the lead against a determined guerrilla opponent in some of the most rugged terrain on earth. The Soviets properly identified sanctuary as a critical requirement for the Mujahideen to wage a successful resistance, but never effectively deprived the insurgency of this requirement. The Soviet Union failed to deny sanctuary to the Mujahideen because it deployed an inadequate force to Afghanistan, but more importantly, it proved unable to counteract international support for the insurgency.

### **Sanctuary Defined**

The term sanctuary traditionally refers to physical safe havens that provide insurgents the opportunity to rest, rearm, refit, train, receive medical attention, or recruit and organize reinforcements.<sup>3</sup> Insurgents may seek sanctuary in geographically advantageous areas, such as jungles or mountains, which exploit asymmetrical advantages against conventional forces.

Similarly, insurgents may find adequate sanctuary and sustainment support in villages or population centers. Internal sanctuary potentially exists in any area within a state where the counterinsurgent force cannot, or does not, “extend control or significant influence.”<sup>4</sup> While internal sanctuaries usually demand a reduced logistics burden, they may not offer the level of security found in sanctuaries established across international boundaries.

Insurgent sanctuaries in neighboring states have historically been protected from “counterinsurgent interference.”<sup>5</sup> The threat of broadening a conflict, combined with the potential for international condemnation or retaliation, deters counterinsurgent forces from violating international boundaries to attack insurgent sanctuaries in neighboring states. Insurgents might find increased security in sanctuaries that transcend international borders, but the logistical impacts potentially overwhelm the capabilities of the resistance. Sanctuary, whether internal or in neighboring states, is a critical requirement for most successful insurgencies. Although sanctuary denial does not necessarily guarantee insurgent failure, it undermines the strength of the resistance.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, “Effective COIN operations work to eliminate all sanctuaries.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Geographical Context**

In order to study the role of sanctuary in the Soviet-Afghan War, one must appreciate Afghanistan’s geographical context. Roughly the size of Texas, Afghanistan shares borders with Iran to the southwest, Pakistan to the south and east, China to the extreme northeast, and the former Soviet states of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the north (see Appendix A: Afghanistan’s Neighbors). The Hindu Kush Mountains, with peaks over 24,000 feet, stretch across much of northern Afghanistan. The Suleiman Range, along Afghanistan’s eastern border with Pakistan, is extremely rugged and supports minimal infrastructure (see Appendix B:

Afghanistan 3-D Relief Map). With few exceptions, the mountain regions of Afghanistan are prohibitive for vehicular traffic, particularly motorized and mechanized military vehicles. Moreover, the steep grade of the mountains makes it difficult to prosecute targets with fixed-wing aviation and artillery. The operational key terrain is the “limited road network that connects [Afghanistan’s] cities in a giant ring with side roads to Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Demographics and Culture**

Several ethnic groups comprise Afghanistan’s population with the largest being the Pashtun, followed by the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras (see Appendix C: Main Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan). The Pashtun tribe is split between Afghanistan and Pakistan by the Durand Line (discussed further in the next section). Likewise, the Tajiks and Uzbeks are divided by international borders. The major languages are Pashto and Dari. Approximately 99 percent of Afghans are Muslims (85 percent Sunni).

Afghan personal loyalty is generally to the family, *qwan*, and tribe.<sup>9</sup> Afghans have a long history of uniting to resist foreign invasions and central authority. Describing the impact of the Soviet invasion on the Mujahideen insurgency, Brigadier Mohammad Yousef said, “The arrival of the infidels gave the resistance a cause, transformed the guerilla fighter into a crusader, a Mujahideen, with all that that implies.”<sup>10</sup> One such implication was that the rural population supported, and provided sanctuary for, the Mujahideen.

### **Background**

From the 1830s to the beginning of the 20th century, Afghanistan functionally served as a buffer between British and Russian interests on the Indian subcontinent in what was coined “The

Great Game.”<sup>11</sup> Britain invaded Afghanistan in 1838 during the First Anglo-Afghan War, and again in 1878 during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, to install “a stable, nonaligned or pro-British regime in Kabul.”<sup>12</sup> The British justified the invasions as being necessary to counteract increasing Russian influence throughout the region, not just Afghanistan. Regardless, Britain withdrew from Afghanistan after tough fighting and only partial success in each war. “The Great Game” ended when Britain and Russia entered into the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907. Russia agreed that Afghanistan was outside its sphere of influence in exchange for Britain’s promise not to invade or occupy the state. Afghanistan achieved full independence from British influence in 1919.

One of the most significant byproducts of “The Great Game” with respect to questions of sanctuary was the establishment of the Durand Line in 1893. Attempting to consolidate its rule over northwest India, Britain forced Afghan leader Amir Abdur Rahman Khan to accept this “artificial” boundary that today separates Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The Durand Line gave Pakistan, which was then part of British India, the strategic defensive advantage due to the dominating heights on the east side of the boundary, but ignored the tribal and ethnic demographics of the region by splitting the Pashtun tribe in two. In a culture that emphasizes tribal structure and loyalty over a strong central government and international boundaries, the Pashtun pay little attention to the Durand Line unless its observation benefits them, such as international sanctuary. The Durand Line remains a major source of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Between gaining its independence in 1919 and succumbing to communist rule in 1978, Afghanistan “...balanced the demands of her immediate neighbors and those of external powers...”<sup>14</sup> Seeking normalized relations, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union signed the Soviet-

Afghan Treaty of Friendship in 1921, and subsequently agreed to a neutrality and nonaggression pact in 1931. As British influence decreased in the region after World War II, the Soviet Union boosted foreign aid and arms sales to Afghanistan. Attempting to obtain aid from the Soviet Union and the United States, Afghanistan resisted formal commitments to either country during the early stages of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, however, the Soviet Union gained the advantage in Afghanistan by virtue of its willingness to supply arms, provide favorable terms on aid packages, and offer moral support to the Afghans in their conflict with Pakistan over the Durand Line and the potential creation of a Pashtun state (Pashtunistan).<sup>16</sup>

King Zahir Shah ruled Afghanistan's monarchy from 1933-1973. Mohammad Daud, the King's cousin and the former Prime Minister, assumed power by coup d'état in July 1973. Facing opposition not only from dissatisfied Marxists within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), but also from the general population which resented the government transformation, Daud's presidency lasted less than five years. On 27 April 1978, Soviet-trained Afghan officers staged a coup against Daud and installed President Nur M. Taraki as head of the newly formed DRA. Taraki instituted sweeping liberal reforms that ran counter to Afghanistan's traditional social structure.<sup>17</sup> As counter-revolutionary forces gained momentum, Afghanistan spiraled into a civil war. Religious leaders declared jihad against Taraki's communist regime. Desertions plagued the DRA army.<sup>18</sup> Most of the Afghan 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, for example, deserted and joined the Herat uprising in March 1979.<sup>19</sup> The PDPA situation further deteriorated when Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin seized power on 14 September 1979, after ordering his guards to execute Taraki. Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev considered Taraki's execution a personal insult. Brezhnev questioned Amin's allegiance after Amin had allegedly lobbied the

United States for aid. Furthermore, Brezhnev grew frustrated with Amin's inability to suppress the growing Afghan resistance. Afghan tribes openly revolted against Amin's policies.

The Soviets "apparently believed that a decisive show of armed might, coupled with a change in rulers, would...restore order to Afghanistan..."<sup>20</sup> The Soviet leadership outlined the following objectives for planned operations in Afghanistan: "(1) Unseat Amin, (2) Install Babrak Karmal as the leader of the new Khalq-Parcham coalition, and (3) Use Soviet Troops to gain time for the new regime to restore order and rebuild the Afghan army."<sup>21</sup> Moscow made the final decision to use military force in Afghanistan on 12 December 1979. Under the guise of supporting the DRA army, the Soviets phased combat forces into Afghanistan throughout December 1979. Airborne troops established control of Bagram and Kabul Airfields prior to the massive Soviet airlift on 24 December 1979. Soviet Motorized Rifle Divisions began crossing the Amu Darya on Christmas Day. On 27 December 1979, Soviet Spetsnaz assaulted the presidential palace and killed Amin. Babrak Karmal, Amin's communist rival, became the next Afghan president and true Soviet puppet.

### **Political Turmoil in the 1970s**

Although détente "had moderated...hostilities"<sup>22</sup> between the Soviet Union and the United States during the 1970s, competition for Third World influence heavily impacted the international political landscape. The Soviets gained influence in Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, and Afghanistan, but suffered losses in Chile, Egypt, and Somalia. Despite the mixed outcomes of Soviet Third World activities, Brezhnev was emboldened by the seemingly weak and short-lived American reactions to the Soviet efforts.<sup>23</sup> After Vietnam, the Soviet Union perceived that the United States lacked the political will to engage in Third World conflicts.<sup>24</sup> The United States Congress passed the War Powers Resolution of 1973 and took other measures

to reduce the president's authority to use "covert actions to influence foreign affairs."<sup>25</sup> Even as détente weakened, the Carter Administration refused to leverage grain sales or the new Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT II) to influence Soviet policies in the Third World.<sup>26</sup> The United States expressed concern over Soviet intentions in Afghanistan, but gave little indication that it would levy significant, prolonged opposition to the Soviet invasion.<sup>27</sup>

The dissolution of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in the 1970s contributed to the restructuring of alliances in Asia and the Middle East. Deteriorating relations between the Soviet Union and China confused the situation. Even though China and the Soviet Union were both communist states, they were each interested in containing the other.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the United States and China shared a common goal of limiting Soviet influence in the region. Soviet aid to India exacerbated China's fear of encirclement. Accordingly, the Chinese increased military aid to Pakistan, India's primary adversary.

Relations between the United States and Pakistan were also strained in the 1970s. The United States chose not to provide arms to Pakistan during its 1965 and 1971 wars with India. In 1975, President Ford lifted the U.S. military arms embargo. Nevertheless, relations steadily declined over accusations of Pakistani human rights violations, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's coup d'état in July 1977 that removed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto from power, and Pakistan's intentions to build a nuclear weapons program.<sup>29</sup> In April 1979, President Carter, under the requirements of the Symington Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, suspended economic aid to Pakistan for importing-uranium enrichment technology. Pakistan joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979, but rekindled relations with the United States after the Soviets

invaded Afghanistan. Pakistan's foremost concern was countering Soviet aid to India, but it also wanted to prevent a strong Afghan government from reviving the Pashtunistan issue.

Finally, the oil-rich states of the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, gained economic and political clout in the 1970s. Not only were they "a key factor in the Arab-Israeli dispute and global energy politics, but they also had become an alternate source of aid, particularly for poorer states with Islamic populations."<sup>30</sup> Iran essentially severed relations with the United States when it overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979, and subsequently held 52 U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days. Soviet-Iranian relations were short-lived as the Soviet Union accused Iran of meddling in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> As Iran temporarily disengaged from the bipolar alliance structure in 1979, Afghanistan became the focal point for East-West influence in the region.

### **Soviet Combat Operations**

In December 1979, the DRA army mustered less than half of its 90,000 authorized troops for security and counterinsurgency operations. Regardless, the Soviets devised an operational concept for their occupation plan that revolved around a capable DRA army. Soviet forces entered Afghanistan intending to:

- "Stabilize the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, air bases and logistics sites.
- Relieve the Afghan government garrison forces and push them into the countryside to battle the resistance.
- Provide logistic, air, artillery and intelligence support to Afghan Forces.
- Provide minimum interface between Soviet occupation forces and the local populace.
- Accept minimal Soviet casualties.
- Strengthen Afghan forces to defeat the resistance so Soviet forces could withdraw."<sup>32</sup>

By late January 1980, the Soviets had secured Afghanistan's major population centers and lines of communication. The DRA army proved poorly trained and incapable of independent combat operations. Consequently, the 40<sup>th</sup> Army expanded its role in the struggle against the Afghan resistance. Initially determined to merely support the DRA army, the Soviets led the majority of combat operations against the insurgents.

During the initial months of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Mujahideen suffered severe losses when attempting to engage the Soviets in relatively large troop formations. Realizing the futility of conventional tactics against superior Soviet firepower, Mujahideen forces broke into smaller bands and embarked upon an insurgency rooted in guerrilla tactics.<sup>33</sup> (The Soviet General Staff refers to this period as Phase One.)

The Soviets escalated major combat operations against the growing Mujahideen resistance during Phase Two, March 1980 to April 1985. Unable to sustain the heavy losses inflicted by the Soviets during Phase One, the Mujahideen refined their guerrilla tactics, established operating bases in the mountain regions, and recruited additional forces. The Mujahideen relied on ambushes and raids to leverage their asymmetrical advantages against the 40<sup>th</sup> Army's conventional forces. When circumstances, such as being surrounded or defending operating bases, forced the Mujahideen to engage Soviet forces directly, they sought close combat in order to complicate, if not negate, Soviet aviation and indirect fire support.<sup>34</sup> Mujahideen access to internal sanctuary, both in the mountains and in sympathetic rural villages, defined the insurgency and the Soviet response during this phase of the war.

Emphasizing the major road network and the Afghan-Pakistan border, the 40<sup>th</sup> Army conducted multiple large-scale operations across Afghanistan to flush out and destroy the Mujahideen, including six offensives in the Panjshir Valley during Phase Two. Realizing the

limitations of its large, conventional force, the 40<sup>th</sup> Army reduced the basic maneuver element to a reinforced battalion in 1982. Airborne assault forces and the Spetznaz, exploiting the tactical mobility offered by Soviet helicopters, were exponentially more successful than the road-bound, mechanized forces that dominated the 40<sup>th</sup> Army's Order of Battle. The DRA army remained a supporting effort during this period.

Drawing upon the lessons of Mao, the Soviets initiated a ruthless campaign during Phase Two to destroy the villages on which the Mujahideen depended for support and sanctuary. They "chose to try to eliminate potentially hostile civilians through force and fear."<sup>35</sup> The Soviets mined villages, burned crops, killed livestock, mined pastures, and destroyed irrigation systems. Of Afghanistan's estimated population of 17 million people at the start of the war, Soviet bombing killed 1.3 million, forced 5.5 million out of the country and into refugee camps in neighboring Pakistan and Iran, and created 2.2 million "internal refugees."<sup>36</sup> The Soviets attempted to separate the insurgents from the civilian population by depopulating key areas of Afghanistan. Although complicating the Mujahideen's logistical situation, the Soviet efforts during this phase failed to defeat the insurgency.

Soviet troop levels peaked at roughly 120,000 between April 1985 and January 1987 (Phase Three). Soon after General Secretary Gorbachev assumed power, the Soviets launched a major campaign against the Mujahideen. According to Lester Grau, "The Mujahideen were badly battered and close to breaking, but the Soviets did not realize it."<sup>37</sup> Failing to achieve decisive results, the Soviets modified their strategy in Afghanistan. Instead of leading the counterinsurgency fight, the Soviet Union now focused on strengthening the DRA army in order to transfer responsibility back to the Afghans (as originally intended in 1979). Still relatively weak, the DRA army relied on the Soviets for aviation, artillery, and engineer support.

Reflective of the Soviet shift in strategy, Gorbachev withdrew six 40<sup>th</sup> Army Regiments, some 15,000 troops, in 1986. Capitalizing on curtailed Soviet offensives, the Mujahideen quickly increased operations in order to frustrate negotiations between the DRA government and the Pashtun on the Pakistan border to establish armed self-defense detachments.<sup>38</sup>

The final Soviet phase lasted from January 1987 until February 1989. With the exception of Operation Magistral in 1987, the Soviets virtually ceased offensive combat operations during Phase Four. The DRA government and the Soviets concluded that a military solution to the Afghan problem did not exist. The Soviet Union agreed in principal to withdraw its forces in support of Afghan national reconciliation goals. The 40<sup>th</sup> Army withdrew the first half of its force from 15 May 1988 to 16 August 1988, and the remaining elements from 15 November 1998 to 15 February 1989. The PDPA efforts to reconcile Afghanistan failed miserably as the country resumed its civil war of the 1970s.

### **Inadequate Force to Deny Sanctuary**

The Mujahideen benefitted to varying degrees from both internal and transnational sanctuary throughout the Soviet-Afghan War. Within Afghanistan, the Mujahideen sought refuge in the mountains and rural villages. Externally, the Mujahideen found sanctuary in Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, Iran. The Soviets recognized the requirement to deny sanctuary to the insurgency, and expanded their objectives accordingly. Instead of simply controlling the cities, towns, and major lines of communication (LOC), the Soviets endeavored to “eliminate insurgent centers, separate insurgents from the population, and deny by interdiction outside aid and sanctuary.”<sup>39</sup> Despite tactical innovations and the ad hoc development of counterinsurgency doctrine, the Soviets lacked the troop strength and composition to eliminate internal Mujahideen sanctuary, or to interdict transnational aid and sanctuary.

Soviet efforts to deny internal sanctuary drove the Mujahideen “base of support across the Pakistan border where it was out of Soviet reach.”<sup>40</sup> Pakistan provided secure sanctuary for the insurgents throughout the war. The Mujahideen were able to rest, rearm, refit, train, receive medical attention, recruit, organize reinforcements, and settle their families with minimal fear of Soviet interference.<sup>41</sup> The Soviet Union was unwilling to expand the war into Pakistan or Iran in order to deny transnational sanctuary, a topic thoroughly discussed in the next section. In November 1986, a member of the Politburo said to Gorbachev, “Too long ago we spoke of the fact that it is necessary to close off the border of Afghanistan with Pakistan and Iran. Experience has shown that we are unable to do this...”<sup>42</sup> Even in their best year (1986), the Soviets were able to interdict less than one third of the arms and equipment the Mujahideen smuggled across the Pakistan border.<sup>43</sup>

Scholars have suggested that counterinsurgent forces should maintain a ten-to-one ratio against insurgents in order to be successful.<sup>44</sup> Never combining for more than approximately 200,000 troops, the Soviets and DRA army did not approach this ratio. By 1987, the Mujahideen had achieved numerical parity by also mustering about 200,000 full and part-time fighters.<sup>45</sup> Assuming the insurgents could arm and sustain even half their estimated strength, the Soviets and DRA army would have had to field one million troops to gain a ten-to-one ratio. Prior to the invasion, Soviet planners estimated that it would take “30-35 divisions”<sup>46</sup> to completely control Afghanistan. Still, the Soviet commitment did not exceed five and two-third division equivalents, less than four percent of all Soviet ground forces.

Lester Grau suggests that “...the Soviets never had enough forces in Afghanistan...”<sup>47</sup> They discovered that it took around “85 percent of their force and DRA forces to provide basic security – guarding cities, industry, airfields, garrisons and outposts along the supply routes from

the Soviet Union.”<sup>48</sup> Soviet forces available for dedicated counterinsurgency operations typically totaled between 18,000 and 23,000 soldiers.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the majority of the Soviet troops sent to Afghanistan, especially in the initial phases, were poorly trained reservists and conscripts who lacked the necessary initiative, flexibility, and small-unit leadership to fight a successful counterinsurgency against a hardened enemy.<sup>50</sup> Drug addiction was a problem within elements of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>51</sup> Soviet Central Asian troops allegedly colluded with the Muslim insurgents.<sup>52</sup> Instead of increasing the 40<sup>th</sup> Army’s troop strength, the Soviets focused on improving troop performance, modifying tactics, and maximizing technological advantages.

The Soviets attempted to use military force to deny, or mitigate the effects of, both internal and transnational sanctuary. Neutralizing Mujahideen sanctuary in rural villages was a primary Soviet concern. Given the Soviet desire to minimize troop commitments in Afghanistan, the 40<sup>th</sup> Army lacked the necessary manpower to realistically attempt large-scale pacification efforts outside the major population centers.<sup>53</sup> Though content to cut-off and ignore some isolated areas, the Soviets, as previously discussed, embarked upon a ruthless campaign during Phase Two to destroy rural villages and depopulate the countryside along infiltration routes and in less isolated regions. Targeting the Afghan rural population and infrastructure, the Soviets did in fact undermine the Mujahideen use of villages as sources of sustainment and sanctuary. One should note, however, that the refugee camps to which the 7.7 million displaced Afghans fled became fertile Mujahideen recruiting grounds.<sup>54</sup> Increased troop levels may have enabled the Soviets to conduct a more robust pacification effort, thereby limiting local sanctuary for the Mujahideen without fueling the insurgency’s cause or generating increased international condemnation.

Even with the Soviet destruction of hundreds of Afghan villages, the Mujahideen found internal sanctuary in the mountains of eastern and southern Afghanistan. They leveraged the relative safety of the mountains to conduct ambushes, shell airfields and other key targets, smuggle arms and supplies, protect operating bases and weapons caches, and mitigate the Soviet firepower advantage. The Mujahideen logistical burden naturally became more complex after the Soviets depopulated the countryside, but the insurgency survived due, in part, to the 40<sup>th</sup> Army's failure to deny physical sanctuary in the mountains.

The 40<sup>th</sup> Army realized early in the conflict the deficiencies of its large, conventional force in fighting a guerrilla opponent in mountainous terrain, specifically its inability to deny physical sanctuary. By the end of 1980, the Soviets began modifying tactics and emphasizing combat flexibility.<sup>55</sup> They created the combined-arms brigade, armored group (*bronegruppa*), and finally in 1983, a dedicated counterinsurgency force comprised of airborne, air assault, designated reconnaissance, and special operations (Spetsnaz) troops. The counterinsurgency force performed typical light infantry missions such as long-range reconnaissance, ambushes, raids, and support for conventional operations.<sup>56</sup> The Soviets also increased the integration of aviation assets, particularly helicopters, to provide tactical mobility, logistics support, and fire support. The MI-24 Hind gunship was especially effective prior to the Mujahideen acquisition of Stinger surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) from the United States in 1986. The Mujahideen felt the improvements of the Soviet forces within Afghanistan. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the most successful Mujahideen commander in the Panjshir Valley, said, "It has become a very hard war, far harder than before. Their commandos have learned a great deal about mountain guerrilla warfare and are fighting much better than before."<sup>57</sup> Regardless, the Mujahideen found adequate internal sanctuary to continue the resistance.

The Soviets demonstrated on multiple occasions the ability to secure key terrain for limited periods of time, but they generally did not have the force structure or sustainment capability to maintain a consistent presence outside their garrisons. For example, in April 1986, the Soviets and DRA army seized a major Mujahideen administrative base at Khawar, three kilometers from the Pakistan border, only to withdraw to their garrison at Khost within a day.<sup>58</sup> The Mujahideen continued to operate from Khawar for the remainder of the conflict. Similarly, the Soviets conducted ten large-scale sweeps in the Panjshir Valley over the course of the war with no long-term degradation of Mujahideen activity in the region. The Mujahideen would temporarily evacuate the contested areas only to return after the Soviet forces withdrew. In addition, offensives in one area of Afghanistan typically necessitated economy of force missions in others. Afghanistan's terrain was simply too rugged and difficult for the Soviets to rely on air interdiction and a relatively small counterinsurgency force to adequately deny physical sanctuary or infiltration routes within the country. Notwithstanding their limitations, the Soviets "kept the rebels off balance, restricted their initiative, complicated their resupply, and caused them to be more cautious."

Militarily, the Soviets were unable to seal the borders with Pakistan and Iran for the same reasons they were incapable of denying the Mujahideen sanctuary in the mountain regions of Afghanistan. The counterinsurgency force was relatively small. They lacked the troop strength to hold key terrain. Along many infiltration routes, the terrain made target acquisition and weapons employment difficult. Frustrated by their relative inability to close the border with Pakistan, the Soviets heavily mined the border region and infiltration routes. These tactics did not significantly impact Mujahideen operations. In 1982, the Soviets even contemplated constructing a "border security system, including guard towers, fences, and

minefields.”<sup>59</sup> However, the Soviets were unwilling to commit the monetary resources or the estimated 300,000 troops necessary to construct and man such a system.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, the Soviets deployed an inadequate force to Afghanistan to militarily deny the Mujahideen either internal sanctuary or transnational aid and sanctuary.

### **Countering International Support for the Mujahideen**

Unable to militarily secure Afghanistan’s borders, or to adequately interdict the Mujahideen infiltration routes, the Soviets attempted, from the beginning of the conflict, to pressure Pakistan and Iran into closing their respective borders.<sup>61</sup> The Soviets threatened everything from airstrikes and artillery barrages to outright military invasion.<sup>62</sup> They also threatened Pakistan with “stirring up Baluchi and Pashtun nationalism, a menace to the country’s very existence.”<sup>63</sup> Even though the Soviets conducted numerous air and artillery strikes into Pakistani territory, the Soviet threats were, for the most part, in vain. Pakistan publicly denied supporting the Mujahideen, but functionally provided sanctuary and “allowed its territory to be used for the transshipment of aid from other countries into Afghanistan.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the Afghan Bureau of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) actively supported the Mujahideen by funneling money and weapons, providing intelligence, conducting training, and planning operations.<sup>65</sup> Even if the Soviet Union had been tempted to carry out its threats to invade Pakistan or Iran in order to deny Mujahideen sanctuary, political constraints precluded such possibilities.

The Soviet Union severely underestimated the negative international reaction to its invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup> Based on the relatively weak and short-lived responses by the West and the Third World to Soviet exploits in Czechoslovakia, Angola, and Ethiopia, “...the Soviets apparently calculated the [political] costs as moderate or at least containable.”<sup>67</sup> For its part, the

international community largely condemned the Soviet invasion. On January 14, 1980, the United Nations General Assembly, after a Soviet veto in the Security Council, voted 104 to 18 for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> The General Assembly passed similar measures each year of the conflict by comparable margins.<sup>69</sup> India was the lone regional power that consistently supported, or at least refused to condemn, the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup>

President Carter took a surprisingly strong stand against the Soviet invasion. In addition to public denunciation, President Carter instituted several punitive measures against the Soviets such as withdrawing the SALT II treaty from Senate ratification procedures, blocking the export of 17 million metric tons (mmt) of grain, curtailing Soviet fishing rights in U.S. waters, stopping the sale of computers and other technologies, and boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, President Carter warned the international community, obviously targeting the Soviet Union, that, "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."<sup>72</sup> The Soviet expansion of the war into Pakistan or Iran would likely have met this criterion. Although relations between the United States and Iran had disintegrated, President Carter essentially offered de facto protection to both Pakistan and Iran against Soviet aggression. In effect, the negative reaction of the international community to the Soviet invasion, particularly the United States, protected the Mujahideen's transnational sanctuary.

President Reagan countered the Soviet expansionist move by adopting a roll-back policy. The Reagan administration felt that "new communist regimes in Third World countries could be toppled if local insurgents, or 'freedom fighters' were supported."<sup>73</sup> "Support" meant more than money and arms; it also entailed facilitating transnational sanctuary. The United States, like the

Soviet Union, understood the importance of Pakistan to the Mujahideen's success. In 1982, the Reagan administration, ignoring the provisions of the Symington Amendment, solidified relations with Pakistan by negotiating a \$3.2 billion civil and military aid package that included 40 F-16s.<sup>74</sup> In 1987, the United States Congress approved an additional aid package to Pakistan for \$4.02 billion.<sup>75</sup> To a certain degree, these aid packages demonstrated the resolve of the United States to support an ally in the region, thus serving as an additional deterrent to potential Soviet notions of forcefully eliminating Mujahideen sanctuary in Pakistan.

By 1988, the United States had increased annual monetary and arms support for the Mujahideen to approximately \$700 million.<sup>76</sup> Other states such as China, Iran, Britain, France, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) funneled varying amounts of money and arms to the insurgents throughout the conflict.<sup>77</sup> Guerrilla warfare expert Anthony James Joes suggests that "...it would be impossible to overestimate the importance either of the willingness of foreign powers to supply the insurgents with modern weapons or the failure of the Soviets to isolate the country from that assistance."<sup>78</sup> Pakistan and Iran provided more than sanctuary to the Mujahideen; they were the insurgents' lifeline to the outside world.

The Soviets had no serious intentions of expanding the war beyond Afghanistan's borders. They "wanted the war to remain a low-level, local conflict and to avoid any escalation or direct spillover into neighboring countries."<sup>79</sup> Aware of the potential for direct confrontation with the United States or China, as well as increased isolation within the international community, the Soviets were largely constrained from pursuing the Mujahideen into Pakistan, Iran, or China.<sup>80</sup> Soviet escalation would have energized international opposition, particularly in the United States, China, and Islamic states, while also providing the United States with justification for increasing its defense spending. The Soviets literally could not afford to escalate

the war. By the mid-1980s, an overwhelmingly expensive arms race with the United States threatened to overwhelm the Soviet economy. Gorbachev sought a respite from the arms race. The Soviet expansion of the war would have undermined arms control negotiations with the United States, further isolated the Soviet Union in the international community, and significantly strained its fragile economy. Ultimately, the Soviet Union's inability to counteract international support for the Mujahideen prevented it from denying the insurgents access to transnational sanctuary.

### **Conclusions**

Dr. Thomas A. Bruscino captured the essence of insurgent sanctuary when he said, “As long as the guerrillas have a safe place to which to retreat and rest, and from which to gather resources and launch new attacks, they can fight as long as they have the will to keep on fighting.”<sup>81</sup> The Soviets clearly were not going to break the will of the Mujahideen, who were fighting a jihad against “infidels.” Therefore, Soviet prospects for success in Afghanistan demanded the elimination of internal and transnational Mujahideen sanctuary. Without question, the 40<sup>th</sup> Army complicated Mujahideen operations and sustainment efforts by depopulating the countryside, improving its counterinsurgency force, and employing superior firepower and technology to interdict infiltration routes from Pakistan and Iran.<sup>82</sup> However, the Soviet Union never effectively denied internal or transnational sanctuary to the Mujahideen because it deployed an inadequate force to Afghanistan, and it proved unable to counteract international support for the insurgency.

Counterinsurgent forces cannot rely on conventional tactics and firepower to deny physical sanctuary in mountainous or densely forested terrain. Such terrain impedes target acquisition and effective weapons employment. A counterinsurgency fight requires highly-

trained light infantry and special operations forces capable of leveraging technology, not relying on it. Additionally, counterinsurgent forces must possess the troop strength necessary to ensure local security, secure key terrain, target and destroy insurgent operating bases, interdict infiltration routes, and secure borders if unable to deny transnational sanctuary. The 40<sup>th</sup> Army was incapable of accomplishing these critical tasks.

Given the geo-political situation during the late 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union could not realistically pressure Pakistan or Iran to police their respective borders. International opposition to the Soviet invasion, particularly by the United States and China, emboldened Pakistan to actively support the Mujahideen. Soviet efforts to deny transnational sanctuary were limited to small-scale air strikes, artillery barrages, and terrorist activities. The Soviets could not risk direct confrontation with the United States and China by expanding the war. The interdiction of Mujahideen caravans entering Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's only viable mechanism through which to mitigate the effects of transnational sanctuary and support.

Denying sanctuary to the Mujahideen would not have guaranteed a Soviet victory in Afghanistan, but it was a necessary prerequisite for any chance of defeating the insurgency. The Soviet Union had already alienated the majority of the Afghan population through its ruthless depopulation of the countryside, support for an illegitimate central government, and status as a foreign occupier. The Mujahideen were tough, flexible, dedicated guerrilla warriors who possessed the will to resist occupation in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. While sanctuary denial would have severely undermined the resistance effort, the will and passion of the Mujahideen likely would have kept the insurgency alive. Given the Soviet Union's desire to minimize cost, casualties, and troop commitments in Afghanistan, the Mujahideen may have succeeded, albeit on a longer timeline, even without sanctuary or easy access to external support.

Twenty years after the Soviet withdrawal, the United States now faces the daunting challenge of denying sanctuary to the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the mountains of Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan. Even though the United States and its allies enjoy the benefits of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), precision-guided munitions, highly-trained volunteer forces, modest levels of international support, and functioning diplomatic relations with Pakistan, they are still struggling to deny insurgent sanctuary. The Taliban are resurging in the Pashtun villages of eastern and southern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. The Durand Line remains as relevant in 2009 as it was in 1979.

Special forces and technological advances in satellites, UAVs, and other collection devices, provide opportunities for the United States and its allies to track and precisely target Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, such capabilities lend themselves to sanctuary disruption, vice denial. Although the more permissive international environment facilitates cross-border strikes into Pakistan, long-term security cooperation with Islamabad may be jeopardized if sovereign incursions continue to occur unilaterally. Despite Pakistan's unstable political situation, the United States must convince President Zardari, through aid or otherwise, that it is in Pakistan's best interests to police the border regions so as to improve its own security, and theoretically negate the requirement for cross-border strikes. Moreover, the United States must provide Pakistan with the necessary assistance to adequately accomplish such a task. Coalition success at denying Taliban and Al Qaeda sanctuary hinges on counteracting Pakistani support, or at least indifference, for the insurgents.

Finally, the coalition in Afghanistan must regain the momentum against the insurgents by increasing special and light infantry forces in theater. The Afghan military and police forces should continue to grow and assume a greater security burden so as to put an Afghan face on the

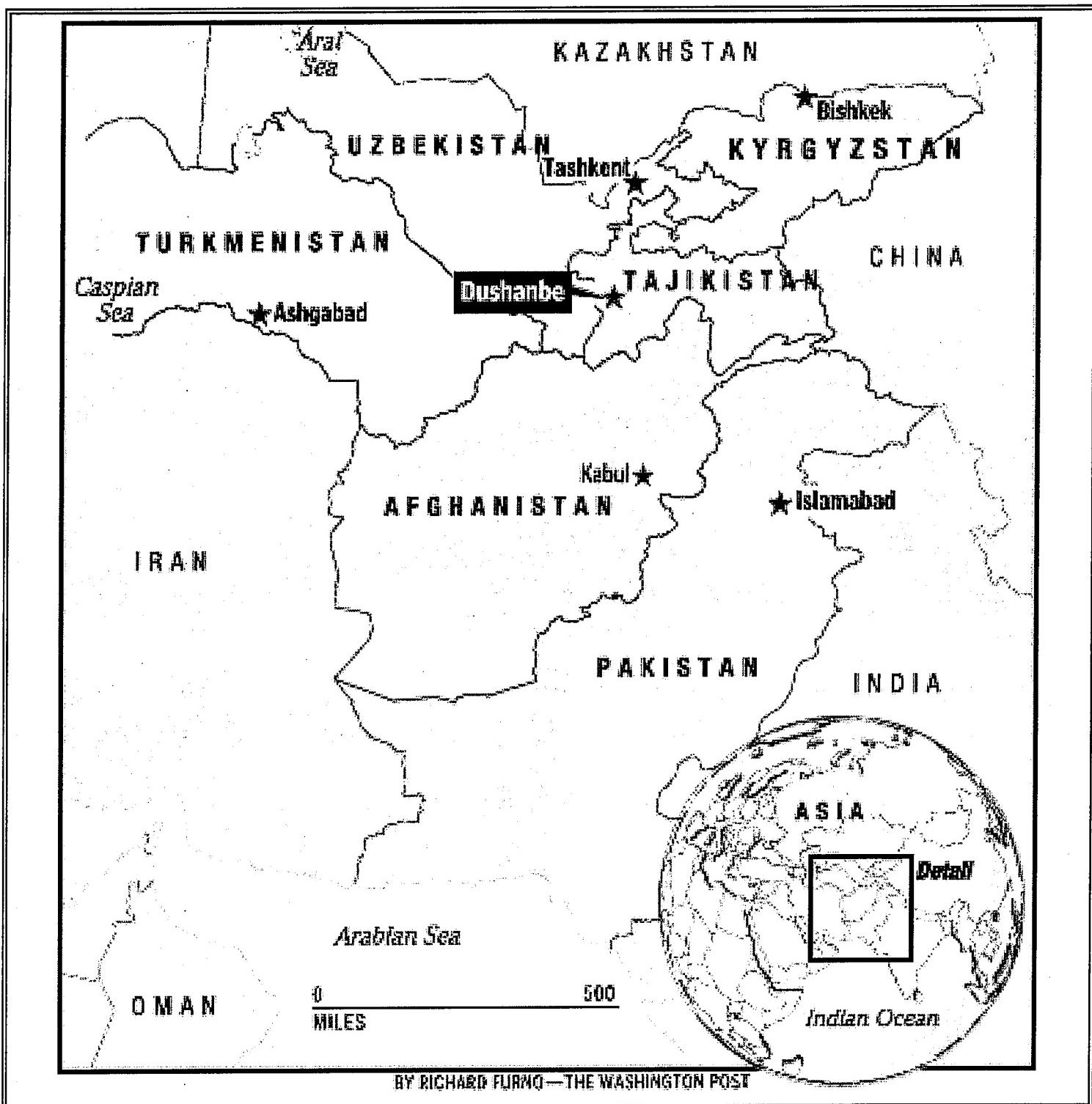
counterinsurgency effort. By pacifying the rural villages in eastern and southern Afghanistan, the coalition will force the insurgents into the mountains where they are more susceptible to interdiction. The Afghan and Pakistani governments must ultimately achieve a unity of effort to effectively deny insurgent sanctuary in the border regions. The Soviet-Afghan War illustrates the necessity to combine military and diplomatic efforts in order to deny both internal and transnational sanctuary.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mohammad Yousef and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story* (Lahore, Pakistan: Jang Publishers, 1992), 49.
- <sup>2</sup> Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds. and trans., *The Soviet Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 18.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of the Army and Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24 or MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, December 2006), 1-16.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of the Army and Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1-16.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of the Army and Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1-16.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas A. Bruscino, *Out of Bounds: Transnational Sanctuary in Irregular Warfare* (Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 8.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of the Army and Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1-16.
- <sup>8</sup> Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (March 2004): 129.
- <sup>9</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 130.
- <sup>10</sup> Yousef and Adkin, 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence E. Grinter, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Its Inevitability and Its Consequences," *Parameters* 12, no. 4 (December 1982): 53.
- <sup>12</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1986), 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Grau and Gress, xxii.
- <sup>15</sup> Grinter, 54.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Grau and Gress, xxii.
- <sup>18</sup> John M. Hutchison, "Scorched Earth Policy: Soviets in Afghanistan," *Military Review* 62, no. 4 (April 1982): 33.
- <sup>19</sup> Grau and Gress, xxiii.
- <sup>20</sup> Joseph J. Collins, "The Soviet-Afghan War: The First Four Years," *Parameters* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 49.
- <sup>21</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 81.
- <sup>22</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Bradsher, 141.
- <sup>24</sup> Bradsher, 140.
- <sup>25</sup> Bradsher, 141.
- <sup>26</sup> Bradsher, 144.
- <sup>27</sup> Bradsher, 152.
- <sup>28</sup> Bradsher, 36.
- <sup>29</sup> Oliver Roy, "The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War," *Adelphi Papers* 259 (Summer 1991): 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 36.
- <sup>31</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 128.
- <sup>32</sup> Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya Nawroz, "The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan," *Military Review* 75, no. 5 (September-October 1995): 19.
- <sup>33</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 134.
- <sup>34</sup> Grau and Gress, 20.
- <sup>35</sup> Bruscino, 59.
- <sup>36</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 135.
- <sup>37</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 141.
- <sup>38</sup> Grau and Gress, 27.
- <sup>39</sup> Department of the Army, "Lessons from the War in Afghanistan," U.S. Army Report (Declassification Date May 1989), <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us11.pdf> (accessed August 22, 2008): 22.
- <sup>40</sup> Aaron A. Danis, "Afghanistan Revisited: Soviet Lessons Learned," *Military Intelligence* 16, no. 4 (October-December 1990): 31.
- <sup>41</sup> Yousef and Adkin, 49.

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- <sup>42</sup> Quoted in Bruscino, 69. "Communist Party Soviet Union Central Committee Politburo transcript," 13 November 1986.
- <sup>43</sup> Oliver Roy, 22.
- <sup>44</sup> Anthony James Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 297.
- <sup>45</sup> Joes, 314.
- <sup>46</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 134.
- <sup>47</sup> Grau and Nawroz, 23.
- <sup>48</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 140.
- <sup>49</sup> Scott R. McMichael, "The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War," *Parameters* 19, no. 4 (December 1989): 29.
- <sup>50</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 147.
- <sup>51</sup> George W. Collins, "The War in Afghanistan," *Air University Review* 37, no. 3 (March-April 1986): 45.
- <sup>52</sup> Joseph J. Collins, "The Soviet-Afghan War: The First Four Years," 53.
- <sup>53</sup> Joes, 314.
- <sup>54</sup> Joes, 314.
- <sup>55</sup> Grau and Gress, xx.
- <sup>56</sup> McMichael, 29.
- <sup>57</sup> Quoted in Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 122.
- <sup>58</sup> Yousef and Adkin, 172.
- <sup>59</sup> Bruscino, 61.
- <sup>60</sup> Vladimir Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB: My Life in Soviet Espionage* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 349.
- <sup>61</sup> Bruscino, 61. Oliver Roy, 13.
- <sup>62</sup> Bruscino, 61.
- <sup>63</sup> Joes, 306.
- <sup>64</sup> Joes, 305.
- <sup>65</sup> Yousef and Adkin, 3.
- <sup>66</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 89.
- <sup>67</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 134.
- <sup>68</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 85.
- <sup>69</sup> Joes, 307.
- <sup>70</sup> Joes, 309.
- <sup>71</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 87.
- <sup>72</sup> James E. Carter, 1980 State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980.
- <sup>73</sup> Oliver Roy, 34.
- <sup>74</sup> Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 153.
- <sup>75</sup> Oliver Roy, 39.
- <sup>76</sup> Joes, 310.
- <sup>77</sup> Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," 136.
- <sup>78</sup> Joes, 313.
- <sup>79</sup> Oliver Roy, 32.
- <sup>80</sup> Doug Borer, "War in Afghanistan: How it differs from the Soviet Experience," *Virginia Tech Research Magazine* (Winter 2002), <http://www.research.vt.edu/resmag/2002winter/war.html> (accessed August 22, 2008): 4.
- <sup>81</sup> Bruscino, 80.
- <sup>82</sup> The FIM-92 Stinger, introduced to the theater in 1986, naturally degraded Soviet aviation operations.

## Appendix A: Afghanistan's Neighbors



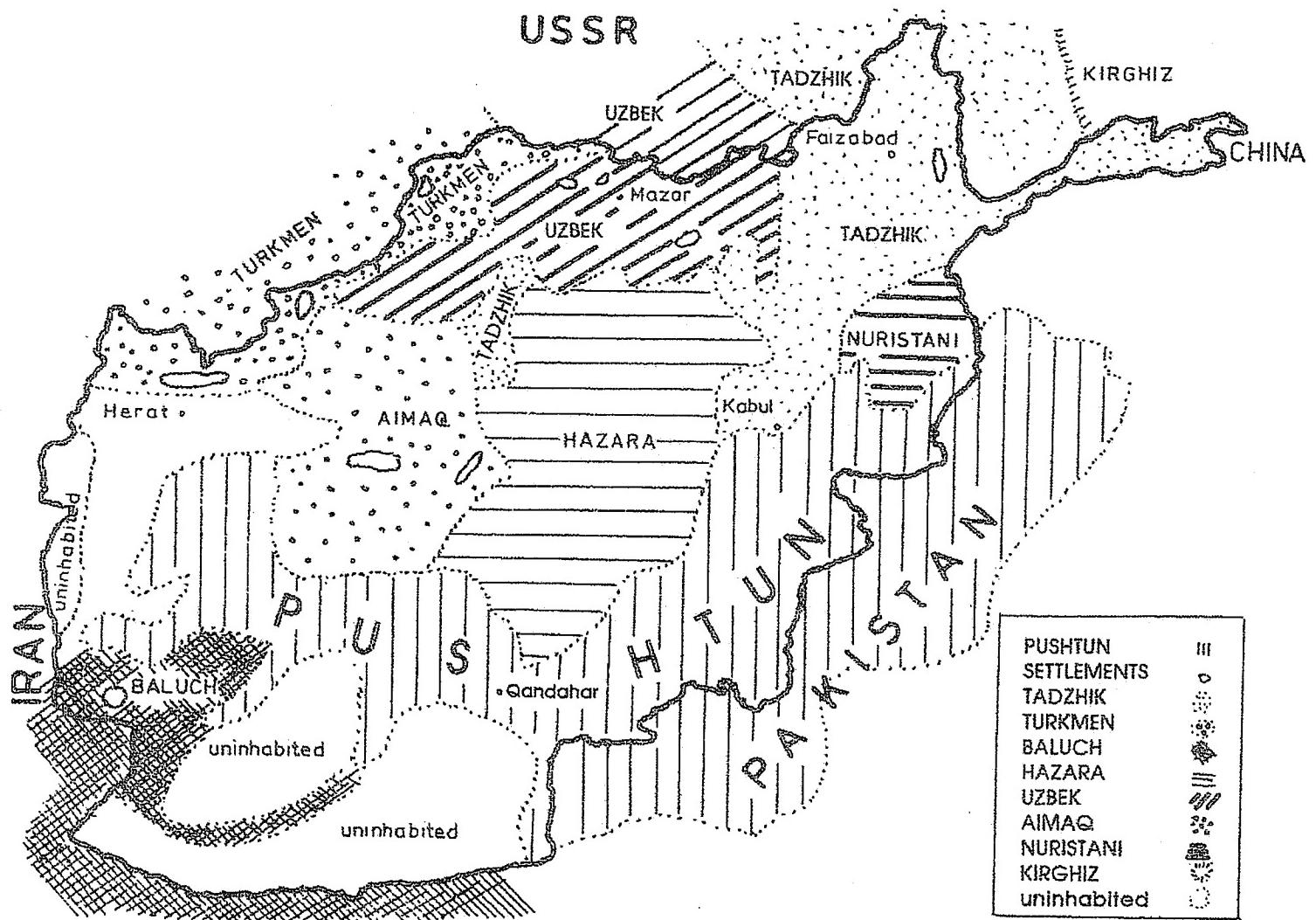
Source: Richard Furno, *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2001.

**Appendix B: Afghanistan 3-D Relief Map**



Source: U.K. Ministry of Defence, No Date Available.

### Appendix C: Main Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan



Source: John C. Griffiths, *Afghanistan: Key to a Continent* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 79.

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